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SUBJECT: MFA DISCUSSES XINJIANG PRESS ARRANGEMENTS AND ACCESS

Summary

¶1. (SBU) BEGIN SUMMARY. On July 29, PressOff met with Mr. Zhang Yong, Deputy Director of the Information Department of the People's Republic of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Zhang responded to questions about the logistics and philosophy behind the decision to pursue a markedly more open press strategy in Urumqi, Xinjiang, than the central government had following the March 14, 2008, riots in Lhasa, Tibet. Zhang attributed the current clampdown on reporting in other cities in Xinjiang to a problem of local governments not entirely understanding or complying with the October 17, 2008, edicts which allowed greater foreign journalist freedom. Local regulations implemented to protect the safety of all foreigners - not just foreign journalists - also were compounding the access problem, he added. Zhang spoke of the influence of the May 12, 2008, Sichuan earthquake, the Olympics and the media coverage from the Tibet riots as factors influencing the openness foreign journalist encountered in Urumqi. He would only characterize future openness as occurring on a "case by case" basis and denied any new policy initiatives. Zhang concluded by voicing his "disappointment" with American media reporting from Xinjiang. While praising hard news reporting as "generally balanced," he bemoaned the "confusing of the true facts" and the "fanning of hatred" undertaken by Western editorials. Finally, Zhang also previewed some media preparations for the 60th anniversary of the P.R.C's founding. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) COMMENT: The number of high-profile events over the past two years for which the Chinese government has managed foreign press coverage has led to a more sophisticated handling of foreign journalists. While China's natural instinct is to limit information for damage control, the lesson of last year's Tibet riots was that limited access leads to one-sided coverage. We see the MFA's efforts in Xinjiang as reflecting a new willingness to relax information controls to present the real story. It remains to be seen whether this relative openness continues through the October 1 celebrations for the 60th anniversary of the PRC's founding, for which security will reportedly be tight. End comment.

Press Center Logistics

¶3. (SBU) On July 29, PressOff met with Mr. Zhang Yong, Deputy Director of the Information Department of the People's Republic of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to discuss the experience of foreign media in Xinjiang following the July 15, 2009 riots in Urumqi. Zhang noted that "several" MFA Information Department staff were on the ground in Urumqi by July 6 to help man a press center set up by the local government. The MFA Information Department staff's main purpose was to help the local government "understand" the situation and better "understand" how to work with foreign media, according to Zhang. The press center, which Zhang and his notetaker referred to as "the Information Center" was under the control of a joint central, provincial and local government "task

force."

¶4. (SBU) The Information Center, which required all foreign media to register, had 243 journalists representing 119 media organizations registered at its peak. The Task Force held several meetings a day and MFA, in conjunction with the State Council information Office, took the lead on all press issues. Zhang characterized the activity of the local government as "cautious" in releasing information to foreign media, but allowing journalists "real access" in order to reflect facts. The Task Force worked closely with the local Xinjiang government officials and, Zhang implied, forced them to see the "logic" of press-friendly gestures such as supplying foreign journalists with the only working Internet connection in Urumqi.

How It Looked From the Other Side

¶5. (SBU) Separately, Western reporters from several media outlets told PressOff they were pleasantly surprised by the openness and genuinely helpful attitude from Chinese press officials that they encountered in Urumqi. Reuters' Lucy Hornby characterized this as a "positive trend in reporting conditions in Xinjiang, vis-a-vis Tibet, including non-Tibetan Autonomous Region Tibetan areas." She was also noted her surprise at the CDs and DVDs handed out by P.R.C. press officers in Urumqi depicting the graphic violence inflicted on Han citizens by Uighur rioters (which were then taken back on the grounds that "there weren't enough for every organization to have its own.") New York Times reporter Ed Wong told PressOff that he and his assistant were met by MFA Information Department and State Council Information Office staff when they first got off their plane in Urumqi and were bused with other reporters to a central hotel where they had access to the Internet. On the first morning after the riots, they were initially brought around Urumqi by bus to see the extent of the damage and conduct interviews with average citizens in groups. But when a mob of angry Uighur women looking for their husbands materialized and the situation quickly degenerated, the guided tour came to an end and the press handlers "gave up herding everyone." Wong described complete freedom to wander about and interview Urumqi citizens, which led to a piece about a Han family whose son had been killed in the riots.

Is Xinjiang Open or Not?

¶6. (SBU) When pressed on whether Xinjiang currently was or was not open to foreign media, and the situation in Kashgar, Xinjiang where foreign journalists have been followed, detained, and told to leave, Zhang became visibly uncomfortable and said that the MFA does not control the rulings of the local governments.

¶7. (SBU) He explained that new regulations had been sent out to all provincial and local governments highlighting the October 17 edict on foreign reporter freedoms. Any misinterpretations of the law would come from regional governments. Xian, Guangzhou, Shanghai and other such big cities were doing a great job of responding to the new ruling but a few places were still "suspicious" or didn't fully understand or were "not used to" these new rules. It takes time for each level of government to become accustomed to the main principles of new regulations, Zhang elaborated.

¶8. (SBU) In Kashgar, Zhang said the local government had its own regulations and the right to close the region for "the safety of all foreigners," including foreign journalists, since their safety could not be guaranteed during these violent and tragic times. His bottom line: Xinjiang is open for foreigners except in some local areas, out of a need to be "cautious" in protecting them. Comment: It appears the real bottom line is that Xinjiang is open where and when the government, whether local or central, says that it is. End comment.

Lessons Learned, But No New Policies

¶9. (SBU) Zhang was initially a bit defensive about the idea that the Chinese government had any lessons to learn from prior events, claiming that the P.R.C was "always open to the media because we have nothing to hide." But over the course of the conversation, Zhang did admitted that it was "partially correct" to say lessons had been learned not just from the coverage of the March 2008 riots in Lhasa, Tibet, but also from the positive results coming from the relative open coverage of the May 2008 Sichuan earthquake and the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

¶10. (SBU) Zhang described a "change in mindset" in the PRC government about press issues following the Lhasa riots. "We are doing better now," he added, pointing to the new foreign journalist

regulations passed on October 17, 2008, as "open" compared to those of the past and welcoming of foreign media. (NOTE: The new law allows foreign reporters to travel freely within China - except in the TAR -- and interview anyone they choose, as long as they have the interviewees' permission. END NOTE)

¶11. (SBU) Zhang asserted that "we're not changing to a new policy" for foreign coverage of sensitive events. Instead, he insisted the P.R.C always wants to be transparent but "in different ways for different occasions." The Chinese government had learned "a lot" in the last 15 months (since the March 2008 Tibet riots), "more than many countries could go through in 10 years." These events gave the government a chance to accumulate experience and, he implied, would inform their future handling of subsequent events.

¶12. (SBU) However, in the event of a hypothetical plane crash in a remote region, Zhang was "confident" that details would be given to foreign journalists and a similar set-up to Urumqi would take place with Internet accesses, distributed DVDs and specific measures taken to ensure accurate, detailed and timely dissemination of information to foreign journalists.

"Balanced" Reporting But "Disappointing" Commentary

¶13. (SBU) Zhang began what appeared to be prepared remarks by saying that the Chinese government "always wanted to tell the truth" and let reporters know what they were thinking. However, Zhang Yong told PressOff that he had found American media reporting on the Xinjiang riots "disappointing" and, while American reporters may have been surprised by the Chinese government's openness, they still had a "biased mind-set."

¶14. (SBU) Zhang acknowledged that hard news reporting in the U.S. media was "generally balanced" but newspaper opinion pieces were "most disappointing" and way off the mark. Zhang noted three specific areas of disappointment: 1) U.S. media had "confused true facts" in Xinjiang; 2) the Western press is "fanning hatred" with its description of a Han-Uighur "war" and portraits of machete-wielding Uighurs; and 3) the U.S. media continues to ascribe the problems in Xinjiang to P.R.C. government policies, when the cause was clearly (to him) "a tragic plot caused by separatists overseas."

¶15. (SBU) This is why, Zhang opined, the Western media has problems reporting in China. A recent op-ed in Global Times/Huanqiu Shibao by Ding Gang, a People's Daily editor, in which Ding vowed never to read the Wall Street Journal again due to its biased coverage, reflected "the true feelings of the Chinese people," Zhang concluded.

Press Arrangements for the 60th Anniversary of the P.R.C.

¶16. (SBU) Zhang also gave a general preview of outreach to foreign media during the National Day celebrations surrounding the 60th anniversary of the P.R.C.'s founding on October 1, 2009. It would be "much better than for the 50th anniversary" and much more press friendly for foreign reporters, Zhang enthused. Press and public relations for the event would be even more open than the access enjoyed by foreign media in Urumqi. There would be a press center and "more things," including Wi-Fi and access to events for foreign media, as well as books, postcards and other handouts (but not CDs/DVDs). Accommodations would be "more convenient and more comfortable" than 10 years ago.

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